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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to measure the effect that dialect of presentation has on Black-English-speaking children's oral reading performance, this study measured the percentage of unknown words attempted by third and fifth grade subjects on equivalent forms of an oral reading task presented in Standard English, Black English standard orthography, and Black English nonstandard orthography. Results indicated that, overall, while subjects scored similar percentages of omissions on the Standard English and Black English standard orthography forms of the oral reading task, fifth graders scored a smaller percentage of omissions on the Black English standard orthography form of the oral reading task, and third graders scored a smaller percentage of omissions on the Standard English form. All subjects scored a higher percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form of the oral reading task than on the other two forms. Educational implications are discussed. (Author)

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Is use of word attack skills a function of dialect?

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Is use of word attack skills a function of dialect?

Several research studies have questioned whether dialect of presentation affects performance of Black English-speaking children on equivalent oral reading tasks and have yielded contradictory results (Liu, 1975-76; Simons and Johnson, 1974; Sims, 1972; Harber, Note 3). At present, this question is far from being definitively answered (Harber, Note 2). In an attempt to further explore the effect dialect of presentation has on Black English-speaking children's oral reading performance, this study was designed to measure the percentage of unknown words attempted by subjects on equivalent forms of an oral reading task presented in standard English, Black English standard orthography, and Black English nonstandard orthography. The degree to which a child attempts to figure out unfamiliar words rather than just ignores unfamiliar words and waits for aid can be used as an indication of the child's reading ability. Ekwall (1976) suggests that children who do not try to attack unfamiliar words but just wait until aid is given often lack self-confidence in their ability to read. On the other hand, attempts at unfamiliar words have been described as substitutions based on the syntactic and semantic information the reader obtains from the context (Goodman, 1970).

A review of the literature (Ames, Rosen, and Olson, 1971; Brown, 1968; Johnson, 1975; Rosen and Ames, 1972; Goodman and Burke, Note 1; Harber, Note 3) led the author to hypothesize that:

(1) Subjects make a significantly greater percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form of the oral reading task than on the standard English form.

(2) Subjects make a significantly greater percentage of omissions on the standard English form of the oral reading task than on the Black

English standard orthography form.

Method

Sample

The subjects were 90 third grade and 90 fifth grade Black English-speaking children randomly selected from two predominantly Black inner-city schools. All subjects had been exposed to reading instruction using standard English materials throughout their school experience.

Instrumentation

Three forms of the Gray Oral Reading Tests (Gray, 1963) were used to measure oral reading. Form C was presented in standard English. Forms A and D were translated into Black English by a Black person who speaks both standard English and Black English and is familiar with the inner-city culture. A second translation was obtained as a reliability check; the percent of agreement between the translators was .99. The translations were done in conformity with the observed phonology, morphology, and syntax of Black English as described by Fasold and Wolfram (1970), Labov (1967), and Stewart (1969). Form A was written in standard orthography (i.e., no effort was made to indicate differences in pronounciation between standard English and Black English) and Form D was written in non-standard orthography (i.e., the passages were written as they are pronounced by a speaker of Black English). The author conducted a pilot study to ascertain the test-retest reliability of the Black English translations of the Gray Oral Reading Tests. The test-retest reliability of Form A was found to be .99 ($p < .001$) and Form D was found to be .94 ($p < .001$) using the Pearson product-moment correlation. Order of presentation was counterbalanced across forms.

In order to establish a basal level, each third grade subject began with the third passage (which is equivalent to first grade level). Any third grade subject who made seven or more oral reading errors at the first grade level was given the pre-primer and primer passages. Each fifth grade subject began with the fifth grade (which is equivalent to third grade level). Any fifth grade subject who made seven or more oral reading errors at the third grade level was given the first and second grade passages; if he was unsuccessful at these passages he was given the pre-primer and primer passages. Each subject was allowed to continue reading progressively more difficult passages until the point where he made seven or more oral reading errors on each of two successive passages. All oral reading was recorded on audio tape by the examiner and later transcribed. After the transcriptions were scored according to the directions in the test manual, the author calculated the percentage of omissions and percentage of commissions for each subject on each of the three forms of the oral reading test. Errors classified as omissions consisted of words not attempted aloud by the subject. Errors classified as commissions consisted of words which the subject attempted but did not read correctly. Errors included in this category were mispronunciations, substitutions, inversions, omissions of part of a word, and reversals. Only passages which were read in their entirety were counted in the calculations.

Statistical Analysis

Multivariate analysis of variance with repeated measures was performed to determine whether the percentage of omissions differed by grade level and/or by form of the oral reading task. Since the comparisons predicted were not orthogonal, the Dunn a priori multiple comparisons procedure

(Dunn 1961) was used to test the hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

The results of the multivariate analysis of variance with repeated measures indicated that the factor of grade and the repeated measure, i.e., reading errors, were significant beyond the .001 level and the interaction between grade and reading errors was significant beyond the .05 level (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

An examination of the means indicated that the fifth grade group made significantly fewer omissions than the third grade group. That the third grade group attempted a significantly smaller percentage of unfamiliar words than the fifth grade group is not surprising because one can assume that the fifth grade group had been exposed to more years of formal reading instruction than the third grade group, including phonics and word attack skills. Therefore, when unfamiliar words were encountered, fifth graders had more analysis skills to call upon to decode these words than did third graders.

The results of the Dunn a priori multiple comparisons procedure indicated that subjects made a larger percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form (26.77%) than on the standard English form (17.42%) and the Black English standard orthography form (17.09%) of the oral reading task. However, because of the large error term, this difference did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level (d=11.42). Thus, the hypotheses were not supported by the data. The results indicate that

subjects made an almost identical percentage of omissions on the standard English and Black English standard orthography forms of the oral reading task. They made a larger percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form of the oral reading task than on the other two forms; this difference approached, but did not reach, statistical significance. The greater percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form may be attributed to the fact that the Black English nonstandard orthography form required the subjects to perform an oral reading task presented in an unfamiliar code. While their primary dialect was Black English, they seem to have learned via school instruction to associate the printed word written in standard orthography with the spoken word in Black English. The similar percentage of omissions made on the standard English and Black English standard orthography forms of the oral reading task suggest that overall subjects were equally likely to attempt unfamiliar words on the two forms.

Of particular interest is the finding of a significant interaction between grade and reading errors.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

An examination of Figure 1 indicates that the fifth grade group scored the smallest percentage of omissions on the Black English standard orthography form of the oral reading task while the third grade group scored the smallest percentage of omissions on the standard English form. It appears as if the fifth grade group benefited from the Black English standard orthography materials more than the third grade group. This may at first seem contradictory to the belief cited in the literature that the effect of the dialect interference is most critical in the early school years

(Baratz, 1970; Shuy, 1970, 1971; Stewart, 1964; Wolfram, 1970). However, an examination of the standard English and Black English standard orthography forms of the oral reading task reveals that there are more differences between the two forms on the more advanced passages than on the lower level passages. The greater differences in general, and the presence of more syntactic differences specifically, between the two forms at the higher level passages may account for the smaller percentage of omissions made by the fifth grade group on the Black English standard orthography form. That is, at the higher level passages they are more differences between the standard English and Black English standard orthography forms which could be and were beneficial to the Black English-speaking child's oral reading performance.

In summary, the findings indicated that overall subjects scored similar percentages of omissions on the standard English and Black English standard orthography forms of the oral reading task and a higher percentage of omissions on the Black English nonstandard orthography form. However, analysis of simple main effects indicated that fifth graders scored the smallest percentage of omissions on the Black English standard orthography form of the oral reading task while third graders scored the smallest percentage of omissions on the standard English form.

The results of this study lend some support to the notion that dialect of presentation affects oral reading performance of Black English-speaking children. The benefit of presenting reading materials in Black English standard orthography becomes apparent at relatively advanced levels when differences between dialect forms become greater. This finding suggests that a longer treatment period might produce more pronounced results. If

the subjects had learned to read using Black English materials, they might read them better than standard English materials, at every level. Thus, the most appropriate test of the hypothesis that dialect of presentation affects oral reading performance would involve a long-term longitudinal experiment in which one group of Black English-speaking children would receive reading instruction utilizing Black English materials and a carefully matched group of children would receive the equivalent instruction, utilizing standard English materials. While much community resistance would need to be overcome before such a study could be undertaken (Dale, 1972; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Schneider, 1971), it is perhaps the best, if not the only, way the question of the effect of dialect of presentation on Black English-speaking children's oral reading can be resolved.

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Table 1

Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Types of Reading Errors

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between Grade (A)	11814.20	1	11814.20	13.06**
Error	160976.08	178	904.36	
Within Reading Errors (B)	10680.08	2	5340.40	12.84**
A X B	3264.25	2	1632.13	3.68*
Error	842576.36	356	2366.76	

* $p < .05$
** $p < .001$

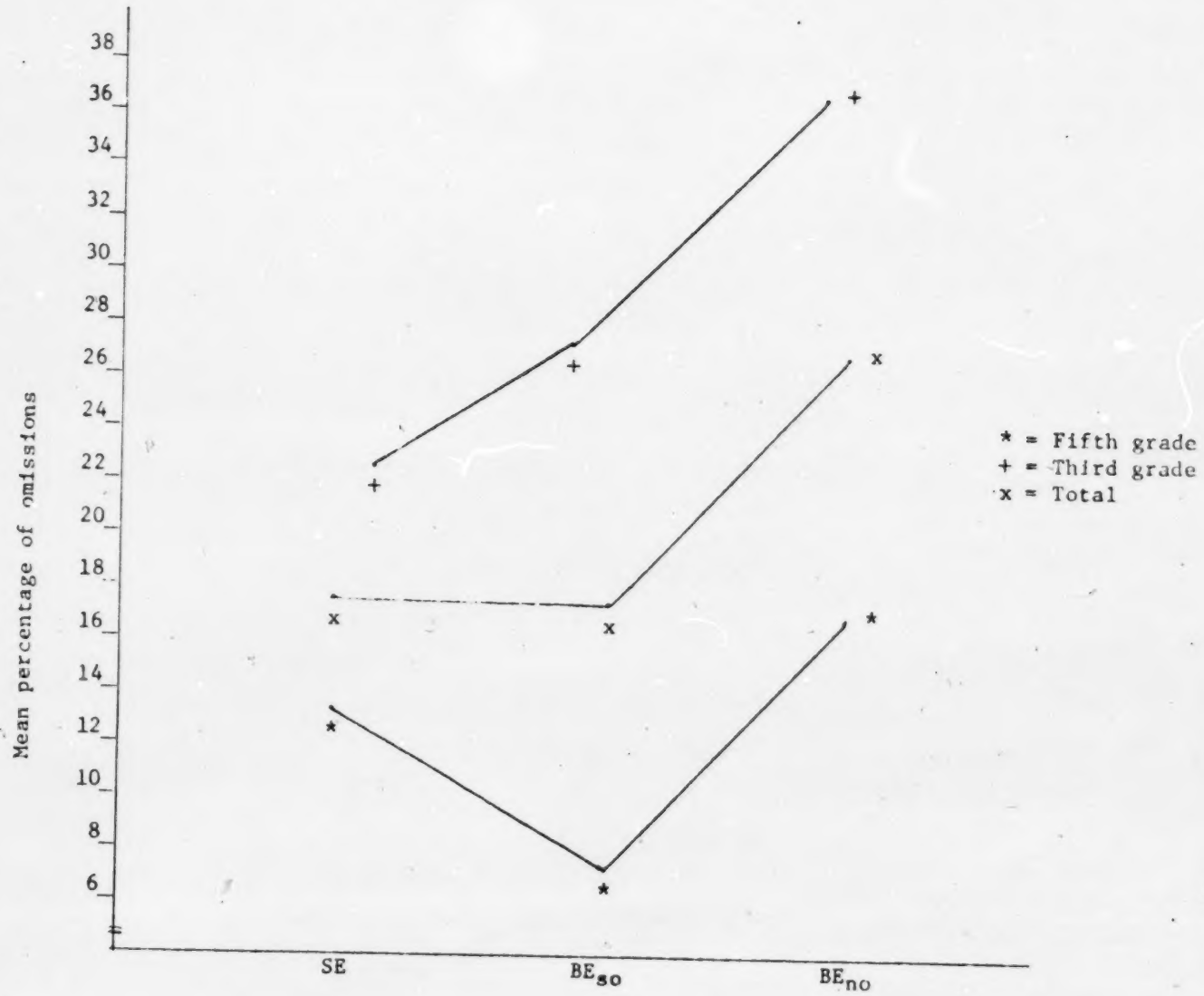

Figure 1

Interaction between grade and reading errors

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